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ABSTRACT

Still photography is useful as a teaching aid for demonstrating the technical aspects of photocomposition. In analyzing still photographs of his own making or from magazines and books, the student learns to move beyond simple expression which may not interest others to a point where he thinks in terms of communication combined with the intent to express a coherent idea. At the point where the student begins to think in terms of communication, the teacher may provide some comments about photographic art that will prove helpful in developing technical and aesthetic knowledge about photography. (This presentation was originally accompanied by a slide show containing seventeen photographic stills illustrating the various points discussed in this document.) (RB)

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FOCUS GROUP: FILMMAKING FOR BEGINNERS

"WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM STILL PHOTOGRAPHY"

James Baird

Like any good scholar, I must begin my remarks with a disclaimer. For reasons which I will explain later. these comments will really be of more help to the neophyte filmmaker rather than the beginner--one who has a little camera experience under his belt and is ready for the next step. But, as the musicians say, "Close enough for jazz."

I chose the topic "What We Can Learn from Still Photography" because I assume that when the beginning filmmaker gets his hands on a movie camera, his only experience with that equipment probably has been at the other end of the lens--as the subject of daddy's home movies of the children or of the family vacation. But he may very well have owned and operated his own brownie, swinger, or instamatic camera, and thus may be familiar, if only in a limited way, with the joys and disappointments of the still camera artist. But let's return to the still camera after we've considered how far the neophyte filmmaker has proceeded.

When he first gets his hands on a movie camera, the beginning filmmaker's first efforts will probably be experiments in movement itself, which of course is the most outstanding element and creative tool of the cinema. It is claimed that

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when the Lumiere brothers exhibited their first film, a few simple shots of workers coming out of a factory, the audience was shocked even before a human figure appeared. They pointed to a tree on the screen and shouted, "Look! The leaves are moving!" Although audiences have grown more sophisticated since that first little demonstration of the new wonder, even the more discriminating aestheticians have agreed that much of the power and force of cinematic art comes from our simple, naive delight at seeing an illusion formed of light and shadow take on the appearance of life.

Just as every child discovers the world anew and every writer finds for himself the power and effect of words as if he were Adam, so every filmmaker's first love is making things move. His first films may depict frantic action, or the camera itself may be employed to create wild visual effects, with swish pans and tracking shots adding an extra dimension of motion to whatever is being photographed. Stop motion and single frame photography may be used to make ordinarily inanimate objects move, or to cause things to appear and disappear as if by magic. In a further move away from the simple photographing of action, the beginner may use the editing principle to construct a montage. He may intercut lines of activity or cut from closeup to long or medium shot to create a different kind of movement, the replacement of one image on the screen with another.

But as long as the subject remains movement itself, or a demonstration of the range of technical effects at the disposal of the motion picture photographer, sooner or later

not only the audience but the filmmaker himself becomes jaded. Not even that first film audience would have sat still for thirty minutes of nothing but moving leaves. After a few reels of such displays of movement, the beginner may find that he is not as thrilled by mere activity as he once was. The beginner may then turn to his teacher to ask what is going wrong and what he should do next. This is where you and I come in.

Film has been of tremendous value in demonstrating in powerful fashion the value of artistic expression. Instead of expressing himself by throwing a rock or opting for non-expression by smoking a joint, a young student learns that there are other and more creative ways of making his viewpoint known. Recently several books have appeared on the subject of teaching composition, all of which make the same point: if you let the student discover for himself that writing can be fun rather than boring him with prescriptive rules which imply that writing is too difficult for most people to master and is properly the concern of a cultural elite, you will find that students are surprisingly more creative than at first might be imagined, and amazingly, they even begin asking questions about those very rules which put them off when instruction was attempted the other way about. When students begin asking questions of this kind, it's a good indication that the student has stopped thinking solely in terms of expressing himself and has come to realize that merely because he is excited about a subject does not mean that his expression of that interest is

bound to interest others; he is now thinking in terms of communication as well as expression, and now the teacher may move in with some comments about photographic art that wouldn't have made much sense to the student before.

It is important that the first negative criticism should come from the audience and not from the teacher. Students are always bringing me their poetry to read, and I always try to have something good to say about it, no matter how mawkish or strained it may be—here's a good line or there's a well-chosen word. If the student asks what's wrong with it, I say, never mind that, just keep writing. Even if it's terrible, the future of western art is not endangered by its appearance. The worst thing that can happen is that the student loses interest in poetry and decides that it's not for him. If he keeps on writing and is really excited by this activity, he will come up with criticisms of his own. Similarly, I am often asked to view films which have virtually no redeeming features, but I keep my mouth shut until the director says to me, "It's not so hot, is it?"

This is the point at which the teacher can begin to offer advice. The reasons for which I stated that my remarks are addressed to the neophyte rather than the beginner should be clearer now. The beginner itches to get his hands on a camera and start shooting. Shooting anything--and rightfully so. At this point he's not interested in looking at still photographs. My suggestion to you as teachers is that you might very well ask the student to dig out some of his old photographs once he is interested in not only shooting but how to shoot. Still photo-

graphs have the advantage of remaining motionless for analysis, so that you can both examine them and decide what were the hits and misses and what might be carried over of the successes into motion picture photography. If the student's own pictures are of no help, pick up a magazine or a book of photographs.

Before we examine some photographs ourselves, I'd like to say something about a technique which is very popular with young people now, cinéma vérité. The premise of this technique, that a subject should be observed and recorded constantly over a long period in the expectation that along the way he will reveal his true nature--is further based on the principle that motion pictures can more accurately record reality than any other art form. I'm going to dispute that principle a little further along, but first a little lesson about cinéma vérité drawn from still photography

PHOTO - b & w snot of man slurping liquid from straw.

This is a candid shot which has been praised by a lot of people including the subject. The expression and the action would be hard to pose; the subject has revealed himself frankly and realistically. One of the difficulties of candid still photography is also a difficulty of cinéma vérité motion picture photography. When people know that a camera and sound equipment are around, they behave differently and self-consciously. Before you can expect to get some really candid, revelatory shots, the subject must be so used to the equipment that he has forgotten about it. This candid shot was taken near the end of an entire day of shooting, during which almost two hundred exposures were

made. Thus if one were to price this shot, the amount would have to include not only the fifteen cents or so that it took to develop and print this exposure, but all those other not so good shots that led up to this one, and that would be a considerable amount of money. Still photographers have an expression, "Film is cheap", which implicitly urges the still photographer to take as many exposures as possible in the hope of coming up with a shot like this.

Even the cinéma vérité directors do not use every piece of film that they shoot, but edit to get the most interesting scenes. This statement does not of course apply to a cinéma vérité purist like Andy Warhol, whose films of an entire day in the life of the Empire State Building or of eight hours of a man sleeping merely demonstrate that straight reality is as boring as hell. Well, such lengthy experiments with this technique are simply beyond the means of most beginning filmmakers. Economic considerations force a planned rather than haphazard approach to the use of film, and, ironically, some of the points I am about to make may seem to be more in order at a meeting of camera aesthetes. Actually, it is necessary for the beginning filmmaker to plan his shots carefully for the most mundane of reasons—money.

The main goal of this advice is to help the filmmaker make his films visually more interesting and thus reinforce whatever non-literary quality the films might have. When you've dug out that old box of still photographs, probably the first thing that you will discover is that nothing is deadlier in

terms of visual interest than a subject which is located squarely in the middle of the picture. A person in a movie who is photographed in this way will look like a passport photograph with animation, or may appear to be staring out of a television screen. Still photographers have a principle of composition called the rules of thirds which can help correct this problem. If you divide a standard film frame in thirds horizontally and vertically and place a subject of interest at one or more of the intersections, you will come up with a picture which is pleasant to look at, as this shot of windfall apples demonstrates:

SLIDE #1 - apples

The eye is led from the two large apples in the foreground to the smaller one in the background. If the apple in the rear had been removed, the picture might still be visually interesting, but it would seem out of balance. That's not bad--perhaps imbalance would produce a disruptive effect and call the mind as well as the eye into play in judging the picture.

A similar effect of imbalance may be achieved by making use of selective focus, which is focussing on one element in the picture while throwing everything else out of focus, as in this shot:

SLIDE #2 - bridge with foliage in foreground

If a filmmaker were to use that bridge as the setting for the action of his film, a motion version of this shot might be used to begin the film. Focus could then be cranked down to reveal the bridge in detail, perhaps with human figures on it about to begin the action of the film.

PHOTO - head shot of girl

This is another shot illustrating the rule of thirds,

but with a difference. The points of attention in this picture are the girl's mouth and the bun in her hair. The eye is drawn from one to the other and can't settle on either as the center of interest. But in terms of the standards of conventional photography, the picture is lighted wrong. Instead of falling on the features as in a classical portrait, so that the expression is revealed, the cheek is highlighted and the features are in darkness. This gives the picture an aura of mystery, or possibly whimsy. The picture is really made most interesting by something the photographer was only indirectly responsible for--the slight upturn of the corner of the mouth. The girl's expression is deadpan except for this. The lighting of this shot, which is all wrong, is a reminder that rules are only there to be broken. This is a point which it is not too wise to make too early in a filmmaker's career.

PHOTO - wider shot of girl at table

This is a print of the entire frame from which the previous shot was taken. A lot of unnecessary material, the wall, part of a chair, was cut out of the final print. Since the girl's dress makes her appear to be wearing shoulder pads, most of it was also cropped out. Finally, the whole thing was printed darker than the scene was in reality and on "warm tone" paper. Still photographers are fond of saying that pictures are made in the darkroom. They mean that it is in the darkroom that the photographer decides how much usable negative there is and precisely how to use it. The motion picture photographer must also cut and trim, but he must do so with the camera itself rather than the enlarger.

With that point I return to one which I said earlier I planned to dispute. Cinéma vérité is based on the idea that the camera with sound is the best medium for exactly reproducing reality. Actually, only the cinerama camera, which approximates the field of vision of the human eye, can do that. When film-makers attempted to make narrative films in cinerama, they found that the director had no way to focus the audience's attention, so they modified the field of vision so that the camera did not see as much. The point is that that the very fact that there is a limit to what can be shown limits the degree to which the camera can record reality. But rather than imposing a limitation on the director's tools, this restriction ironically opens up the director's range of artistic expression.

SLIDE #3 - long distance shot of fireboat

Here's a fireboat doing what fireboats do. Beginning texts on film usually point out that the way to set up a scene featuring a specific location is to start with an establishing or long shot from this distance, then move on to a medium shot coming closer to the action, and finally use a closeup to get the plot underway. But suppose instead of seeing the fireboat all at once, the viewer was given this:

SLIDE #4- fireboat's superstructure

or this:

SLIDE #5 - fireboat's red bow

The first of these two shots sets the viewer's mind working (just what is this thing?) and the second focusses on a particular quality of the boat--its redness and possibly its

association with fire. A shot like one of these may be more useful in establishing viewer interest than the more conventional long shot. Roman Polanski used this approach in the opening shot of Repulsion. The camera shows us a closeup of a face covered with mud and strange looking pads. Where are we? At a witch doctor's hut in the jungle? The camera then pulls back to reveal that we are merely in a beauty shop watching a woman get a facial. But the point has been established which the rest of the film fills out--things are not always what they seem, and reality depends on your perspective.

SLIDE #6 - plane and clouds

What appears to be the beginning of a dogfight in the clouds when framed differently becomes an ordinary fly-by:

SLIDE #7 - plane and shoreline

The first shot of the fireboat's superstructure, besides being puzzling, also makes use of another still camera idea, placing a little bit of something against a whole lot of something else. This technique is sometimes modified by focussing attention on something which is apparently hardly a subject for photography, as in this shot:

SLIDE #8 - house, mountains, and shadow

One would expect that the mountains or even the house would be the main subject of this shot, but the shadow in the foreground occupies an equal space in the viewer's attention. This would be a good establishing shot for a sinister story about the people who live in the house.

Other devices which still photography uses to gain

interest on the part of the spectator and which can be copied in films are such techniques as the establishment of a visual pattern with one strong element which conflicts with the pattern. In this shot of a forest,

SLIDE #9 - forest with diagonal log

the long line of the diagonal log contrasts with the regularity of the standing trees. Since that log is also strongly lighted, it appears to jump right out of the picture. A tracking shot through the forest, stopping at this scene, would rouse the viewer's attention.

Another such device is the use of lines of perspective to deepen the field of the picture and heighten its emotional appeal.

SLIDE #10 - alley

This sjot makes use of lines of perspective in exactly the same way as did the Renaissance artists and designers who first discovered the principles of perspective—to lead the viewer's eye into the composition and involve him with it visually. Unfortunately, a too regular use of such lines may produce a static photograph like a shot with the subject right in the center of the frame. It is better to use some element which fights against the general design of the shot, such as this shot of a sailboat

SLIDE #11 - sailboat and sun

in which the boat's mast leans away from the lines of perspective which draw viewer and boat into the picture.

Most of these remarks have concerned composition, so they apply to the structure of the shot and could be equally useful whether the film is in black and white or color. Now something

should be said about color itself. Many beginning filmmakers start with color because with color reversal film, processing cost differences between color and black and white are negligible and because so many filmmakers and audiences seem to be fascinated with color itself, much as the first audiences were fascinated with movement. But color can be a detrimental factor, teasing the eye and drawing the viewer away from dramatic or otherwise interesting points. Beware of the film about which it is said, "I didn't understand it but it's beautifully photographed." Often "beautiful photography" is a mask for weak content.

Color can add to dramatic value to a scene if it is used with restraint, however. Recall the scene in David Lean's Lawrence of Arabia in which the train is blown up. The whole scene is a symphony in brown—dusty sky, light brown sand, dark brown train, all shot in harsh relief. When, after the train is blown up, a wounded Turk attempts to shoot Lawrence, the trickle of crimson blood from his nose is like a visual scream reminding the viewer of the human cost of the carnage. Here are a few shots in which color is minimized, the first inspired by that very desert scene in Lawrence:

SLIDE #12 - telephone poles and sand

This one, which contains only white, brown, and blue, also indicates how the viewer's attention may be held with a closeup of something ordinarily seen in long shot:

SLIDE #13 - barren tree

Lines of perspective may also be used to run not into

the picture but up or down, creating the impression of dread or superiority, as in this shot:

SLIDE #14 - Victorian structure from tilted angle

The German cinema of the twenties used shots like this to emphasize authority.

Something which appears to be a mistake, like the deliberate cropping of the statue's head in this shot

SLIDE #15 - statue holding plastic rose

may be helpful. This technique is borrowed from the still photographer Irving Penn, who likes to cut off the top of his subjects' heads to focus the attention of the viewer on the features. In this similar shot, notice how much deeper the picture seems with the full head included.

SLIDE #16 - full statue

Finally, it must not be forgotten that still photography is one thing and motion picture photography another. There are some good still shots from which we can learn nothing, like this one:

SLIDE #17 - girl holding small child

The colors are well balanced, the arms and legs are gracefully arranged, and the expressions are good, but as soon as somebody moves, the whole thing falls apart. Caution the beginning filmmaker that photographic techniques are tools in the service of the artist, not ends in themselves. What works in one medium may be disaster in another. Most important of all, he must have something to say before he can figure out how to say it.

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